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John Wesley, Preacher of Scriptural Christianity

By Charles J. Little, A. M.

"John Wesley, the Apostle, if such a name may be applied to any later teacher or preacher, of the whole English-speaking race throughout the world."

—Benjamin Jowett, late Master of Balliol College, University of Oxford.

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John Wesley,
Preacher of Scriptural Christianity

An Address before the Rock River
Conference at Aurora, Ill., Oct. 11, 1903

BY

CHARLES J. LITTLE, A.M.

President of Garrett Biblical Institute

"If I am a heretic, I became such by reading the Bible."

—*John Wesley's Letter to Venn.*

"John Wesley, the Apostle, if such a name may be applied to any later teacher or preacher, of the whole English-speaking race throughout the world."—*Benjamin Jowett, late Master of Balliol College, University of Oxford.*

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Charles J. Little

To the Memory of
Mary Deering
I dedicate these tributes to
Susannah Wesley's Son

"What is Religion, then? It is easy to answer, if we consult the oracles of God. According to these it lies in one single point; it is neither more nor less than Love: it is love which is the fulfilling of the law, the end of the commandment. Religion is the love of God and our neighbor; that is every man under heaven. This love ruling the whole life, animating all our tempers and passions, directing all our thoughts, words and actions, is pure Religion and undefiled."—*From the printed sermon on John Wesley's frequent text: "What is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"*

Is not this a fit occasion to explain myself concerning the style I use from choice, not necessity? I *could*, even now, write as floridly and rhetorically as even the admired Dr. B——, but I dare not; because I seek the honour that cometh from God only. What is the praise of man to *me*, that have one foot in the grave and am slipping into the land whence I shall not return. Therefore I dare no more write in a fine style than wear a fine coat. But were it otherwise, had I time to spare I should still write as I do. I should purposely decline what many admire, a highly ornamented style. I cannot admire French oratory: I despise it from my heart. Let who will admire the French frippery; I am still for plain, sound English. I think a preacher or a writer of sermons has lost his way when he imitates any of the French orators; even Massilon or Bourdaloue. If any man speak in the name of God, let him speak as the oracles of God; and if he would imitate any part above the rest, let it be the First Epistle of St. John, and let him aim at no more ornament than he finds in that sentence, which is the sum of the whole gospel, “We love him because He first loved us.”—*From Wesley's preface to the second collection of his sermons.*

John Wesley, Preacher of Scriptural Christianity

When John Wesley was dying it pleased God to smooth his pillow with pleasant dreams; he imagined that he was preaching or leading class; faint murmurs for the most part moved his lips, but sometimes when his mind seemed brightened by the vision of a multitude, his voice astonished those about him by its strength. God was beautifully gracious to arrange it so; to order all things so that his indefatigable preacher should enter heaven preaching; and that his last words: "The best of all is God is with us," might be alike his greeting to the company he entered and his farewell to the company he left behind him.

The fact is interesting and instructive for another reason: it teaches in the most impressive way what to Wesley himself was the heart of his activity. He was, amid all his multifarious industries, ever the preacher of God's Word and the shepherd of God's flock. Whatever may be said about him as statesman and scholar, as writer and educator and philanthropist, serves to obscure rather than to illuminate him unless his beloved chief activity is made the explanation of it all. Much that has been written about him aforesaid; much that has been written of him recently misconceives the man because it lacks acquaintance and sympathy with the preacher.

The historian, to be sure, must measure the great man by the effects that he produces upon his own and subsequent ages; but the historian never, if he understands his business, attributes all of these effects to conscious design. He knows that human agents produce results that often surpass and often differ from their intentions and their expectations. He knows too that the mightiest results have been achieved by men so wholly taken up with present duty that they have conceived of the future in the vaguest, though most magnificent fashion; conceived of it as the soldier who obeys orders eagerly, conceives of the victory to be achieved by his commander. These are they before whom the future floats as the great white throne of God. These are they that co-operate in the truest sense with the great marshal of events; the maker and builder of human destiny.

And John Wesley was of these among the chief. In the sense in which most public men are statesmen, he was not a statesman at all. Seldom has anyone taken so little thought for the morrow; seldom has anyone seen so clearly and fought so bravely the evil of to-day; seldom has anyone so daringly placed first the kingdom of God and the right-

eousness thereof; seldom has anyone so confidently expected God to vindicate the conduct of an honest servant by giving increase to his labour.

If then we would arrive at the man himself, if we would know what kind of human being it was to whom God gave this increase, we must subtract from his labour all that God has added to it and study the labourer that remains. We shall find him simple and sublime; simple as a child in his conception of his calling, sublime as a seraph almost in the faith with which he accepts and prosecutes it.

This calling was to preach God's word wherever he could do the most good. Can anything be simpler than that? There were men in England, good men too, who in those days set out to be bishops; there were also men in England, and for a time John Wesley was among them, who set out to be great scholars and thinkers; there were in England saints like William Law and John Fletcher who accepted humbly the work that fell to their hands, seeking no other opportunities. But John Wesley faced a singular condition. "I must preach," he said to himself; "I am ordained to preach by the authority of the church, which so far as it means anything, is the authority of God. I am ordained to preach by the inward witness which has given me a message that burns like fire in my brain. Where shall I preach when the churches are closed against me? To whom shall I preach, if not, like my father, to the people of a parish?" The answer that came was simple and yet by no means obvious at first: "I must preach where I can do the most good."

For there is a widespread opinion that Wesley liked the kind of life to which the grace of God constrained him. But this is a mistake. That he liked preaching is true enough; but that he liked field preaching he denied frequently. Quite late in life he declares that it is still a cross to him. He liked, he said, a fine church and a soft cushion, and though he spoke banteringly of polite congregations, he might easily have reconciled himself to administering the See of Canterbury had he conferred with flesh and blood. Marvelous to tell to his successors, John Wesley's thoughts never took that direction; and the full significance of his answer to Joseph Butler, then Bishop of Bristol, can not be estimated until we remember the intellectual greatness of the man to whom it was made and the absolute sacrifice of every church emolument and dignity that it involved. There is a pathos in this reply to the famous author of the "Analogy" quite too deep for tears—the pathos of a soul struggling with ecclesiastical restraints and yet longing to justify his conduct to a mind that he respected and to which he had appealed for naught:

"My lord, my business on earth is to do what good I can. Wherever, therefore, I can do most good, there must I stay, so long as I think so. At present I think I can do most good here, therefore here I stay. Being ordained a priest by the commission I then received, I am a priest of the Church Universal; and being ordained as a fellow of a College, I

was not limited to any particular cure, but have an indeterminate commission to preach the word of God in any part of the Church of England. I conceive not, therefore, that in preaching here by this commission I break any human law. When I am convinced I do then it will be time to ask, Shall I obey God or man? But if I should be convinced in the meanwhile that I could advance the glory of God and the salvation of souls in any other place more than in Bristol, in that hour, by God's help, I will go hence, which till then I may not do."

All of John Wesley's previous life shines concentric in that outbreak of splendour; all the courage of his fearless paternal and maternal ancestors; all the influences of his training at home and school and college; all the impulses nourished and developed in the Holy Club and in his intercourse with William Law; all the power and the joy of the strange warming of the heart in Aldersgate street; all the reflections that perturbed his active mind among the Moravians; all his fresh experience of God's working in him and in those to whom he preached; all the new light that was breaking from God's Word—all these were gathered together into that one luminous decision.

How thrilling the tone of Saul of Tarsus rising obedient to the Heavenly Vision! But the music of it is nothing compared to that of the overmastering outcry: None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy and the ministry which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God.

How beautiful is John Wesley listening to the words of Luther until his heart glows with divine fire! But how much grander is he answering so firmly and tranquilly the greatest churchman of his time!

It is said of Luther that when Staupitz had beaten down every other objection to the Wittenberg call, Luther pleaded his ill-health. In spite of Wesley's long life, he was far from robust in his younger days; and he might have urged a similar plea when Whitefield urged him to preach in the open air. Talking once with his brother Charles, the poet exclaimed, "If God would give me wings I would fly." "If God commanded me to fly," John quietly returned, "I would trust him for the wings." There you have the measure of the man. He did not plead his diminutive stature or his slender frame; he had not the wings of Mercury or the port of Jove; and his throat was weak for he had more than once expectorated blood; and the weather was cold and the winds were chill and the crowds were enormous and perhaps unruly. But the voice said cry and "The Lord," says Whitefield in his extravagant way, "gave him ten thousand times more success than he has given me."

I am not of those that depreciate Whitefield. The results of his preaching were wonderful and the increase of them still continues. But he and John Wesley differed as much as Paul and Apollos and somewhat, I fancy, in the same way. No one probably ever listened to Apollos or

to Whitefield without wondering at the speaker's charm. But Paul and Wesley had each of them that combination of self-effacement and self-revelation which is the secret of persuasive speech; self-effacement in that they stripped themselves of every hindrance to their sole aim, self-revelation in that they laid bare their own hearts in order that they might the better win access to their hearers and achieve their great design. The quick eye of Horace Walpole detected the consummate art of which Wesley was an easy master; but that elegant trifler was stoneblind to the purpose to which that art was always tributary. This purpose, however, must rank first in any study of John Wesley as a preacher; to dwarf it is to misunderstand both him and the law of God that regulated the increase of his labour.

Wesley described this purpose often as doing good. This was a favorite phrase, and when we take his preaching in all its range of years and topics, it is by far the best description of it. He was always and everywhere the preacher and promoter of righteousness; so that the bitterest controversy in which he ever was entangled grew out of his insistence upon good works. The General Rules are an indestructible monument of the organised conscience of early Methodism. We are to do no harm; we are to do all possible good; we are, therefore, to attend diligently the means of grace.

Looking closely into this favourite phrase of our founder and our father we discover that this righteousness, like that proclaimed by Paul, is the righteousness of faith, the goodness that flows from a life hid with Christ in God.

In the preface to the sermons published in 1747 he states that these contain the substance of what he has been preaching for eight or nine years past. Here then we can safely explore its characteristics. For what Dr. Rigg says about the difference in his written sermons and his oral preaching hardly applies to these earlier publications; many of these were preached substantially as printed, varied of course as congregations might require. A comparison of them with the texts and notices of his preaching that abound in his journals reveals clearly the central thought which determines every utterance. This is set forth in what intellectually considered is the greatest of Wesley's productions, the sermon entitled: "THE ORIGINAL, NATURE, PROPERTIES AND USE OF THE LAW." Those who deny that Wesley is a theologian have never read this splendid discourse. They might as well deny the title to St. Paul. The conception of the moral law here displayed is the richest fruit of Wesley's thinking and experience. It is indeed derived from St. Paul; but the development of it is at once lucid, original, and lofty. With the simplicity of Goldsmith, the perspicuity of Paley and an eloquence worthy of Richard Hooker, he describes the moral law as "unchangeable reason and unalterable rectitude"; he traces it back of Moses and of Adam and of the angels to the eternal mind of God "as the everlasting fitness of all things that are or

ever were created." "I am sensible," he adds, "what a shortness and even impropriety there is in these and all other human expressions when we endeavour by these faint pictures to shadow out the deep things of God. Nevertheless we have no other way during this our infant state of existence."

"The law of God is a copy of the eternal mind, a transcript of the divine nature; yea, it is the finest offspring of the Everlasting Father, the brightest efflux of His essential wisdom, the visible beauty of the Most High. With regard to man it was co-eval with his nature; but with regard to the elder sons of God, it shone in full splendour or ever the mountains were brought forth or the earth and the round world were made."

It is, however, the fourth section of this remarkable discourse that reveals the theological basis of Wesley's ethical power. This section discusses the use of the Law. Its first use is to convince the world of sin, to slay the sinner; the second use of it is to bring him unto life, unto Christ that he may live. It drives us by force rather than draws us by love. *And yet love is the spring of all.* The third use of it is to keep us alive; it is the grand means whereby the blessed Spirit prepares the believers for larger communications of his spirit. "I cannot," he continues, "spare the law one moment no more than I can spare Christ; seeing I now want* it as much to keep me to Christ as I ever wanted it to bring me to him. Indeed each is continually sending me to the other, the law to Christ and Christ to the law. On the one hand, the height and depth of the law constrain me to fly to the love of God in Christ; on the other the love of God endears the law to me above gold or precious stones."

When I hear even Methodist ministers lauding the ethical superiority of modern preaching I wonder from what materials they have framed their conception of John Wesley. The glittering ethical dissuasives and exhortations now the fashion are a return to the powerless platitudes of Scotch Hugh Blair; they are pretty talk for parade and sale; but Wesley preached to save. No man had greater contempt for what in his time and in ours is often applauded as a gospel sermon; and he uttered that contempt in sharper words than I would dare to use.† But this was merely incidental; the key-note to his own preaching and the power of it was this: The one way to Christ is knowledge of the Law of God.

In his journal he tells us of preaching from his favorite text: Jesus Christ, who of God is made unto us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification

*Want=need.

†Here are two specimens of it:

"If we only join faith and works in our preaching we shall not fail of a blessing. But of all preaching what is usually called gospel preaching is the most useless, if not the most mischievous."—*Letter to Charles Wesley.*

"Let some pert, conceited fellow bawl out some phrases about the blood and the people cry, 'What a fine gospel sermon!'"

and redemption; he tells us, too, how he was moved with compassion for the rich who were present, to whom he made a particular application. And this brings us to another trait of John Wesley, the preacher. He talked to those before him; he preached not at but to the people. Nothing could be farther from his manly soul than "roasting" the absent for the delectation of his listeners. He aimed to convict and to comfort those at hand. His piercing eye searched the countenances that crowded round him, quick to notice every change of feature; and though he was never in a hurry with his applications, he never failed to make them and to drive them home. No wonder that when his soul was stirred within him, as on that September night at Gwennap, surrounded by ten thousand people, none speaking, stirring or scarce looking aside, he could not conclude until it was so dark that they could hardly see one another. Nor was he satisfied to preach in public only; he followed up his preaching with tender eagerness and was as keen to urge his disciples to perfection as to charm the unsaved to new life and happiness in Jesus Christ.

One of the earliest printed sermons of John Wesley is that preached in St. Mary's, Oxford, eighteen days after his strange warming of the heart, from the text, "By grace ye are saved through faith." Those who imagine that the glow of that experience injured in any way his fine ethical temper should read these piercing words: "This faith is a recumbency upon Christ as our atonement and our life as given for us and living in us; it is a closing with Christ and cleaving to Him as our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, redemption; in one word, our salvation." But what is this salvation? It is (1) a present salvation, (2) a salvation from original and actual, past and present, sin of the flesh and of the spirit, both from the guilt and power of it.

"Never," he concludes, "was the maintaining of this doctrine more seasonable than it is this day. Nothing but this can give a check to that immorality which hath overspread our land like a flood. Can you empty the great deep drop by drop? Then you may reform us by dissuasives from particular vices; but let the righteousness which is of God by faith be brought in, and so shall its proud waves be stayed. There be those that can talk as sublimely of the law as those who have it written by God on the heart, but take them out of the law into the gospel, begin with the righteousness of faith, and those who just now appeared almost if not altogether Christians stand confest the sons of perdition."

A sermon preached in 1763 on the Reformation of Manners discloses still another trait of John Wesley's power as a preacher; his clear perception that reforms are possible to those only whose conduct is nobler than their speech. There is something divinely touching in Wesley's groaning after perfection and his humility in leaving to others the profession of it.* The reason of this paradox is, however, quite

* "I have told all the world I am not perfect and yet you allow me to be a Methodist. I tell you flat I have not attained the character I draw. Will you pin it upon me in spite of my teeth."—*John Wesley to Dr. Dodd in 1767.*

obvious. Wesley weighed his words. He who objected to his people applying the epithet "dear" to God and Christ; he who would not insist upon another man's using the term "trinity," knew the full meaning of the term "Christian perfection." His ideal, scriptural and sensible as it was, and his belief in the power of God to work the miracle of righteousness when and how He pleased, never blinded him to his own defects of temper, trifling as they were, mere wrinkles in the garment of his flesh; therefore he was cautious lest he cause anyone to stumble. But now that his entire life is spread out before us nothing is plainer than this: John Wesley lived according to his doctrine and the joy that came to him he valued as the light upon his pathway, shining brighter and brighter unto the perfect day. His experience never dwindled to a recollection or even to a cluster of them; he expected God every morning as certainly as he expected daylight and he never dreamed of asking anyone to do aught for God that he did not gladly do himself. Think of the old man of 81 "walking ankle deep through slush and snow until his feet were steeped in snow-water nearly from morning till evening" in order to collect £200 to get coal and bread and clothes for the poor of his society. This is but one instance of sixty years of a concord of deed with word that winged his utterances with electric fire. Cicero is right when he says that the perfect orator must be *bonus vir*, a virtuous man. His own career would not have ended in an eclipse of blood if his maxim had been made splendid by his example. Wesley's doctrine was. He knew that to save the souls of others he must get his own saved and show them what salvation meant in all its length and breadth and height and power and glory. Hence in this sermon on the Reformation of Manners, he describes with telling insight "what manner of men they ought to be who engage in such a design, and the spirit and manner in which it ought to be pursued." Idolaters of numbers and defenders of craft and cunning might profit from this description.

A favorite quotation of John Wesley was Paul's splendid descriptive phrase, "The Faith that works by Love." Faith he had seen quite early must disclose itself in results; but it was the revelation of his great experience that the perfect efficiency of faith is possible only in an atmosphere of love. Just as the undulations need an ethereal medium to produce light, so faith needs this divine medium to produce life, or to take a simpler illustration, just as our blood needs pure air continually, so faith must renew itself continually in the love of God shed abroad in the heart. Its miracles are wrought only through this replenishing without which it pines and withers and dies. To see how clearly Wesley perceived this and how gloriously he proclaimed it, take another of his favorite themes, the Providence of God. Critics like Leslie Stephen, saturated with the superficial idea of law, so prevalent with a certain type of modern writer, amuse themselves by poking fun at Wesley's references to good and bad angels, and smile over what they deem his

puerilities. They forget that Wesley simply insisted upon realizing what every Christian of his generation pretended to believe; they forget moreover that he shared these beliefs with Shakespeare and Kepler and Milton and Bunyan and Bishop Ken and Samuel Johnson; besides they never read his sermons to note how deep and solid after all is the basis of his confidence. "God," he says, "might act of course directly; he needs no instruments of any kind;" angels or second causes either. "Do you mean," he argues in reply to Pope's famous line "Shall gravitation cease if I go by?"—"Do you mean that the providence of God does, indeed, extend to all parts of the earth with regard to great and singular events such as the rise and fall of empires; but that the little concerns of this or that man are beneath the notice of the Almighty? Then you do not consider that *great* and *little* are merely relative terms which have place only with respect to man. Nothing is small in the sight of the Almighty that in any degree affects the welfare of any that fear God and work righteousness. What becomes then of your general providence, exclusive of a particular? Let it be forever rejected of men as absurd self-contradictory nonsense." Clothed in our cumbrous modern phrase, Wesley's belief was in the Immanent God, immanent by just such agents and instruments as He might choose. But to Wesley it was a belief to live by—not a resonance of words. And he demonstrated it by a daring abandon of himself to God and whatever He might determine. They misread his journal who suppose that Wesley sees the hand of God only when things are going well or who mistake his pleasantries for solemn deliverances. Wesley sees the hand of God in all events, and trusts Him in all emergencies; smiles and shudders are often intermingled in his narrations for those that understand him. But whether smiling at the way in which God screened him by the large woman sitting on his lap; or composing his epitaph in his fifty-first year; or writing the story of his final decay when eighty-seven, it is always Immanuel, God is with us. If he had been struck by some death-dealing stone early in his career, he would have exclaimed with Stephen "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge!" If he had been haled to prison and held there like St. Paul he would have sung praises with or without some brother to keep him company. He might indeed say in later life "I feel and I grieve, but by the grace of God I fret at nothing," and in the exuberance of his joy lose all remembrance of his sorrows, but there had been moments when he needed all the staying power of the presence of God which he preached so clearly. His soul was indeed so charged with it that the thrill of it electrified the listening multitudes. It was to him no glittering generality. It was the blood of his heart and the light of his mind, and the strength of his will and the peace of his soul.

The sermon that separated him from the pulpit of University of Oxford is in many respects the most remarkable of these early publications. Like the sermon on Free Grace, its publication was compulsory.

The theme of it, Scriptural Christianity, connects itself with the famous passage in the preface to his first volume of sermons published in 1747, where he describes himself so touchingly as a man of one book—words which were, so to speak, the afterglow of an experience that almost consumed him by its energy.

Oxford University, professedly a Christian school, the stronghold of orthodox opinion; Oxford, that should have been a city set upon a hill, a light to lighten every home in England; Oxford, whose doctors of divinity were fierce to defend the Bible even in their cups and who sometimes defended it nobly with logic and learning; Oxford University John Wesley knew to be a residence of rakes and idlers and debauchees. The fellows of All Souls College had been taunted when he was at Lincoln in 1733 by words like these: "I would willingly next pay a visit to All Souls College if I could find it. It used to be near Queen's, but if we may judge from the resorts of its members it has been translated over the way and the Three Tuns Tavern is All Souls College." These precious creatures had abandoned all pretense of teaching. Lord Eldon saw a doctor of divinity, unable to support himself except by keeping one hand upon the library building on Radcliffe Square, walking round and round till rescued by a friend. "Oxford," wrote Crosse to his mother sixty years later, "is a perfect hell upon earth. What chance is there for an unfortunate lad just from school, with no one to watch and care for him—no guide? I often saw my tutor carried off perfectly intoxicated." The Savilian professor of Astronomy died after drinking late at his own house with the Vice-Chancellor (who is the actual head of the University) and some others.

Wesley pondered such things in his heart, and his soul grew hot within him. He might have escaped the ordeal by paying three guineas for a substitute; he might have escaped it by preaching a harmless gospel sermon, adorned with erudition, polished and pointless, to use his favorite phrase, "orthodox as—the devil," yet enlivened with a dash of the usual enthusiasm. Or he might have preached, as Joseph Butler would have done, a lofty ethical discourse, expounding subtly and with stately rhetoric some noble virtue, leaving his hearers to applaud and forget it. For once in his life he might have donned the French frippery of Massillon and Bourdaloue or the style of Scotch Hugh Blair, "that popular representative of the last stage of theological decay, that washed-out retailer of second-hand commonplaces, who gives us the impression that the real man has vanished and left nothing but a wig and a gown."

To tell the truth, John Wesley would rather have spoken to the rude multitudes of Blackheath or Gwennap or to a little company in some upper room of Oxford. But here was a duty and an opportunity. Here in St. Mary's, where Wiclif and Latimer had preached and where Cranmer had spoken the words that went far to redeem his earlier cowardice, here he must take up his cross and deliver his soul.

Let no one imagine that he approached the task without most careful preparation. The sermon, printed just as it was delivered, shows in every line of it the hand of a master. He had measured exactly every hostile force and with consummate skill had engineered the way, parallel by parallel, for his intrepid application.

The galleries were crowded with undergraduates eager to see the enthusiast, the Jacobite, the papist, the heretic, the hypocrite, the knave, the Jesuit, the atheist, the exorcist, the despoiler of the poor, the fanatic* who was destroying the Church of England and turning the kingdom upside down. The floor was thronged with heads and fellows of colleges, with here and there a Methodist praying God for help and grace. Young Tom Warton, his eyes inflamed with genius and wine, was probably looking down curiously from above; Wesley's noble friend Isham, the Rector of Lincoln and the learned Conybeare looked up anxiously from among the dignitaries; a few old pupils and companions sat expectant among the scoffing men that never knew the man that they derided. Wesley had prayed that he might speak with authority—to use another of his favorite phrases—the authority of love. And keen observers like Kennicott noted, instantly he began, the serenity of his features, the commanding sweetness of his voice, the grace and propriety of his few gestures. They noted likewise the unfolding of his argument, paragraph linked to paragraph by faultless reasoning, for although Wesley's greatness as a preacher was in the plainness and loving severity with which he applied the truth, yet he never applied it until he had unfolded it with the skill of which his training had made him master. Then, however, he spoke with a plainness, a directness, a courage, a holy energy never surpassed in the history of preaching.

At his first sharp words: Where does this Christianity now exist? Where, I pray, do the Christians live? there was doubtless a stir among the undergraduates. Satire was not uncommon in the pulpit of St. Mary's and the lads would bend over eagerly to listen and to watch for shafts of ridicule. But Wesley was not there for fun. The murmur of amusement in the galleries, the frowning upturned faces of those below him only provoked him to tones of sorrowful entreaty. "Someone must use great plainness of speech towards you. Who will use this plainness if I do not? Therefore I, even I, will speak. And I adjure you by the living God steel not your breast against receiving a blessing at my hands. Let me ask you, in tender love and in the spirit of meekness, Is this city a Christian city? Is scriptural Christianity found here? Are all the magistrates, all heads and governors of colleges and halls, and their respective societies (not to speak of the inhabitants of the town) of one heart and soul? Is the love of God shed abroad in our hearts? Are our lives agreeable thereto? I entreat you to observe that the question is not concerning doubtful opinions but concerning the undoubted

*All these epithets had been applied to him before he preached this sermon.

fundamental branches of our common Christianity. And for the decision thereof I appeal to your own consciences, guided by the word of God." Never soldier bore himself more bravely in the shock of hand-to-hand encounter. Wiclif and Latimer never uttered words more quick and powerful. St. Mary's since then has echoed to the eloquence of Arnold and Newman and Liddon and Church; but no archer of them all has sent such flaming arrows with so true an aim.

O Oxford! Oxford! If thou hadst but known the day of thine opportunity! For the stone that the builders rejected has become the head of the corner. Little did John Wesley think when he sent "without delay" the notes of his sermon to the angry Vice-Chancellor that a future master of Balliol would describe him to freshmen of the nineteenth century as the Apostle of the whole English-speaking race!

John Wesley, I repeat, wrote of himself shortly after this sermon on Scriptural Christianity as a man of one book; but he has left us in no doubt of his meaning. In the ordinary sense he was a man of many books and I find even in his sermons references to Newton and Huyghens, to Pascal and Hutcheson, to say nothing of quotations from theologians and philosophers of every age and from ancient and modern poets, all the way from Anacreon to Pope.*

In his sermon on the Imperfection of Knowledge he displays a remarkable acquaintance with the graving science of his time, treating it with his usual boldness and candor. Modern critics who scoff at his mistakes would do well to imitate Helmholtz in his noble essay upon Goethe's attempt to overthrow the theories of Newton. The giant of German science treats the great but mistaken German poet with as much respect as candor. And Wesley, who had the powerful authority of Leibniz and Huyghens to support him, might indeed be pardoned for balking at a theory which had trying difficulties for Sir Isaac himself. Michael Faraday, I am sure, never mocked the man who was scoffed at by the whole medical fraternity of his time for his belief in the curative powers of electricity; and who certainly deserves respect from the contemporaries of Roentgen and of Finsen.

Here, though, is the notable thing: Wesley's knowledge and reflections were never used for display but were obedient to the truth of Holy Writ.

"Does anything in this book appear dark and intricate—I lift my heart to the Father of lights. I then search after parallel passages. I

*One of the most striking and pathetic of these quotations was taken from his lips by the poet Crabbe, who heard him quote it in a sermon at Lowestoft when Wesley was eighty-seven years old. The lines are these:

"Oft I am by woman told
 Poor Anacreon! Thou grow'st old.
 See, thine hairs are falling all:
 Poor Anacreon! How they fall!
 Whether I grow old or no,
 By these signs I do not know;
 But this I need not to be told
 'Tis time to *live*, if I grow old."

meditate thereon with all the attention and earnestness of which I am capable. If any doubt remains I consult those who are experienced in the things of God; and then the writings whereby being dead, they yet speak." In one of the noblest of his letters he insists: "It is a fundamental principle with us that to renounce reason is to renounce religion; that religion and reason go hand in hand and that all irrational religion is false religion." "Most of the travelling preachers in connection with me," he says in the same letter to Dr. Rutherford, "are not ignorant men. They know all which they profess to know. The languages they do not profess to know, yet some of them understand them well. Philosophy they do not profess to know; yet some of them tolerably understand this also. They understand both one and the other better than great part of my pupils at the university did. I trust there is not one of them who is not able to go through an examination in substantial, practical, experimental divinity as few candidates for holy orders even in the university are able to do." And well indeed might he say this; for John Wesley himself was their tutor and their exemplar. He was no hallelujah centaur* nor would he permit them to be such, and though his heart warmed towards men of blunt and fervent speech, he has left on record his scorn of French frippery and English platitudes.†

From the Bible he learned the way of life and what he learned he taught. Despising no knowledge and no art that would help him teach it more effectively, he would not be decoyed into any kind of preaching that did not promote inward and outward righteousness. "A man may be," he says in his sermon on *The Way to the Kingdom*, "orthodox on every point; he may not only espouse right opinions but zealously defend them against all opposers and yet have no religion at all, no more than a Jew, Turk or Pagan. He may be almost though not altogether as orthodox as——the devil; and may all the while be as great a stranger as he to the religion of the heart. This alone is religion: The Apostle sums it all up in three particulars: righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost."

Thus for more than fifty years John Wesley preached, instant in season and out of season, spreading with God's own help a knowledge of His eternal law and the news of His eternal love in Jesus Christ. There were times, to be suré, as in 1775, when he felt impelled to preach on current events. Mistaken though he was in his views of the American

* "I am no more like your picture of an enthusiast than like a centaur."—*Letter to Dr. Church.*

† Here is his opinion of "the Gospel preachers so-called." They "corrupt their hearers and vitiate their taste. They feed them with sweetmeats till the genuine wine of the kingdom seems quite insipid to them. They give them cordial upon cordial which make them all life and spirit for the present but meantime their appetite is destroyed, so that they can neither retain nor digest the pure milk of the word. . . . Newcastle, cold, weary, heartless, diminished, dead. Such were the effects of this Gospel preaching!" Dealers in the soda-water of life would do well to ponder these cutting words.

revolution, his sermon on National Sins and Miseries is nevertheless a model for those who deal with public questions in the pulpit. Surely the chief thing for the minister of Christ who treats of social problems is that he display the mind of Christ, that whatever opinions he express be uttered without malice and in tender love, and that all his skill in persuasion be directed as Wesley's was, to making his hearers deeply sensible how far their undoubted sins are the cause of other men's misery.

No wonder therefore that his power as a preacher went on increasing to the end. The final entries in his journal reveal a child-like surprise that people crowd to hear him and his explanations of it are beautiful in their humility. But he never crossed the dead-line till he died. Indeed he never crossed it at all, for, being dead he preaches still and shall forevermore.

Among the last records of his public appearances are two of surpassing and enduring beauty, illustrating as nothing else could the old man's might of character. In the one case he preaches a sermon to nine hundred children all arrayed in plain apparel and lovely, he declares, in face and song as the angels in our Father's house. What a picture it is: the beauty of age saluting the beauty of youth. The long hair that falls upon the old man's shoulders is still soft as silk but no longer auburn-black. Yet his eye is bright and his mind alert. Not a word of more than two syllables escapes his lips. He used long ones, anyhow, only when he must. But with the children he used them never. The authority of love has not gone from his voice though it is weaker than of yore and slightly tremulous. But the old lucidity of statement and arrangement holds firmly the little ones' attention; they watch him as I have seen children in these later times watch the play of an electric fountain, spell-bound by the mingled beauty of his presence and his speech.

The other case is not so beautiful perhaps, but far more significant. The aged saint preached at Colchester in 1790. The house was crowded, galleries and floor. As he stood in the high, wide pulpit to address the awe-filled multitude two of his younger brethren supported his feeble frame. Henry Crabb Robinson, then a lad of fifteen, beheld the scene and described it vividly long afterwards. "His feeble voice was barely audible, but his reverend countenance, especially his long white locks, formed a picture never to be forgotten. There was a vast crowd of lovers and admirers. It was for the most part pantomime but the pantomime went to the heart; of the kind I never saw anything comparable to it in after life." He never saw anything comparable to it! There has never been anything comparable to it since the days of St. John at Ephesus. But a letter written by Robinson at the time shows plainly where the power lay. "Not knowing the man," the young lad wrote, "I should have almost ridiculed his figure. Far from it now. I looked upon him with a respect bordering upon enthusiasm." Ay! There's the glory of it. To everyone knowing the man his presence became a divine radiance

and every gesture a benediction; the long white locks were mightier than those of Samson in his youth; and the sentences that now and then emerged from the steady murmur of sweet sounds seemed like an outflow from the invisible world.

Verily, verily, it was the accumulated amen of the good man's deeds that made his words, and even his whispers, so powerful in old age and after death. How numerous and varied and beautiful those deeds had been it was no part of my plan to narrate. Properly narrated, they should stir us Methodists to shame, to heart-searching inquiry and ardent prayer to God for a zeal and a method of activity befitting our superior knowledge and to efforts proportioned to our means and our opportunities. "I am tired of opinions," John Wesley used to say; "I want life." Brethren, I am tired of statistics; I want purity of soul and nobility of conduct, a glorious rivalry of self-sacrifice, an outburst of ethical and spiritual energy, the victory of which shall overcome the world. The Methodism of John Wesley was first an organized conscience and then an organized rapture. It bound together inseparably the eternal law of God with His eternal life in Jesus Christ. Its doctrine of perfection was the two great commandments. Its ecstasies were only incidents of the service that is sonship and perfect liberty. In vain shall we attempt to restore the rapture without the conscience and the conduct that it glorified; the preaching and the revival needed for this and every age is the preaching and the revival of scriptural Christianity.

John Wesley: An Appreciation.

1703-1791

(Reprinted from CHRISTENDOM)

John Wesley records in his journal that on December 18, 1783, he "spent two hours with that great man, Dr. Johnson." Two hours was a long time for him to spend with anybody, but he was very fond of the burly lexicographer. Unfortunately I have not Landor's skill, or I should write an imaginary conversation for these two old men; Wesley, then in his eighty-first year, Johnson six years younger. If one of them "made the little fishes talk like whales," the other made the whales talk like little fishes. They were in spite of that the best talkers in England, and strongly contrasted as they were in appearance and in temperament, they were alike in their candor, their piety, their courage and their love of common sense. Johnson, with his seamed face and strange contortions had browbeaten many an interlocutor, but he never contradicted the man of diminutive stature, whose tranquil face and brilliant eyes and sweet but commanding voice, had conquered mobs and charmed multitudes. The great talker grumbled only when Wesley would not stay to finish the dialogue.

I begin here, for in any estimate of John Wesley, one must remember his natural charm. At home, at the Charter House School, at Oxford; in his societies and in his conferences; conversing, preaching; alone with strong men like Johnson, or facing listening thousands, he ruled, because he fascinated.

This magic was partly an inheritance, and partly an added gift of God. For what is so often described as Wesley's conversion, was not a turning round, but a transfiguration. Rare natural endowments—a penetrating yet poetical mind finely trained; a conscience exquisitely sensitive; a will, tranquil, active, and invincible—were enhanced by a remarkable religious experience. William Law's asceticism, his own high-church proclivities, the Georgia climate, his troubles at Savannah, might easily have spoiled John Wesley's temper and dwarfed his soul; but "the strange warning of the heart" which came to him, not in the period of adolescence, but in the prime of manhood (he was thirty-five when it came), restored to him the gladness of his boyhood and delivered him once for all "from the spirit of bondage again to fear."

Wesley was eminently social, cheerful, radiantly communicative and fond of folks, especially of the poor and the needy and the humble and the good. He learned German to converse with the Moravians; he

learned Spanish to talk to some Spanish Jews in Georgia; he revived his French to carry cheer and help to the French prisoners at Knowle and Winchester. But although he revered knowledge and intellect and integrity and authority, he never worshiped purple and fine linen—the robes of bishops or the coronets of dukes. He had derived or learned from his mother this respect for the soul within the clothes and could detect its presence in the garb of the convict, the rags of a beggar, the fustian of the laborer, or the raiment of a king. The fearless candor and helpful love of human beings that made Susannah Wesley the preacher for the poor of Epworth reappeared in her son, and made him the apostle of England. If the mother had lived in Lambeth Palace, she would have charmed by her beauty, her dignity and grace of speech, her strength of mind and character; and her touch would have quickened the Church of England. She spent her days, many of them, in cruel poverty at Epworth; but through her children she blessed the human race.

All the children of Samuel and Susannah Wesley were clever, but John was most like his mother. He was intellectual without affectation or display. His opinions are often unconventional and daring, whether they relate to philosophy, to theology, to politics or art or literature. The annotations to Shakespeare, which his scandalized executor destroyed, his delight in Swift's "Tale of a Tub," for which his charming sister Martha scolded him, his remarkable edition of Milton's "Paradise Lost," his collection of moral and sacred poems, reveal the wide range of his literary sympathies; his brief introduction to his little dictionary is only one specimen of a wit—trenchant, tantalizing, chuckling. He could preach in German and in French, in Spanish and in Italian, and when Oxford, with her classical traditions, was absolutely indifferent to physical science, he was trying experiments in optics and devouring eagerly the writings of Benjamin Franklin. Demanding reasons for everything, even when a child, every drop of his blood red with his mother's independence, he might have wasted his powers in controversy, if an intense appreciation of life had not taught him the worthlessness of unapplied opinions. He found finally better use for his logic, his eloquence, and his wit, and retired serenely from the disputations into which he had been decoyed by the intensity of his convictions, the attacks of opponents, and his consciousness of dialectical dexterity. He was intellectually inquisitive and acquisitive; not subtle or profound, but acute, candid and comprehensive. He read books of all kinds, walking, riding, and occasionally sitting down. Leisure and he parted company quite early. He compiled books upon theology, history and science, boldly altering and abridging to bring them within the poor man's purse and understanding. He admired every kind of ability, including that of David Garrick. But he ridiculed unreality, smiling alike at the vulgarity of the conceited "bawling" exhorter, and the pomposity of the rhetorical French preacher, and

declared with a chuckle that he was not shallow enough to satisfy a polite congregation. The strain of mysticism in him was of the intellect rather than of the soul. "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy!" This he perceived with Shakespeare and Plato rather than felt with Jacob Boehme and George Fox. His Oxford training made him expert in philosophy and theology, although it obscured more than it explained the Bible; yet we have his word for it, that his opinions changed but little after his fortieth year. There was indeed no pliability in this singularly receptive nature; his career and conduct were influenced greatly by his environment; but the man himself remained the same.

The same yet not the same. The change wrought in John Wesley, like the change in Moses, or like the change in Luther, to whose words it was partly due—"the strange warming of the heart" was a change of feeling, not a change of will. It was the meeting of the human and divine in rapturous recognition. Those who think conversion a volitional act, may learn to distinguish the spirit of bondage from the spirit of adoption when they consider John Wesley and St. Paul. Both of these in their earlier days thought verily that they were doing God service; both, however, lived in the spirit of bondage and were the slaves of the law; both were afraid.

This change of feeling, this expulsion of fear by love, marked an epoch in the life of Wesley and the world. It was a return to joy in the Holy Ghost. A false conception of piety had repressed and almost ruined Wesley's cheerfulness. He had been exact in morals, punctilious in ritual, rigid in self-denial, helpful to the needy, eager to do good; but after all, only a scrupulous and timid servant. Now he heard himself hailed as a son; an unspeakable gladness thrilled him; and this he could not contain. Exulting over what seemed to him and his brother Charles to be a revelation, they went to extremes. "I wonder the people did not stone us," John afterwards declared. But enthusiasm for righteousness and religious joy could do little harm in the days of Fielding and Hogarth and Foote and Smollett. "Johnson," says Thackeray, "shamed Englishmen out of their irreligion." He did; some of them. But the Wesleys and Whitefield and the revival preachers shook the English masses with good news, with the offer of a present heaven, of an interchange of love, divine and human.

To organize this rapture was Wesley's great achievement; to convert it into permanent power for the welfare of the world; to multiply it into a universal joy. No one ever perceived more clearly how easily such rapture runs to waste; hence his differences with the Moravians. No one ever planned more wisely to utilize and to increase such rapture by constant activity. The machinery of Methodism grew; it was not made to order. All great machinery grows. But the growth is never wild. Intelligence directs each improvement to a definite end. Wesley's

temperament was active. He had inherited his father's restlessness; but he had his mother's steady will. He had his father's poetic feeling, but his mother's practical sense; his father's gift for expression and his mother's genius for command. These combined to make him the greatest traveler, the oftenest preacher, and the firmest ruler in England. It is an extravagance to say that he could do what he pleased with his people; there were frequent oppositions and many defections. But in spite of them he controlled absolutely an increasing company who would swallow his physic or come to be electrified, bought his books and kept his rules, built his chapels and sang the Wesley hymns, preached his doctrines, helped in his charities and philanthropies, and accepted his counsels in domestic and national affairs; who were in short the religious and moral dynamos of England from which flashed streams of living fire.

Wesley's theology accordingly was insistently practical. At Oxford he studied the fathers. William Law led him to the mystics. His contact with the Moravians and his knowledge of German led him to Luther and to Bengel. But in this, as in so many things, his mother predominated. Her great heart rebelled against prenatal decrees whether of perdition or of preterition; her pure conscience shrank from the contempt so frequently poured by the Calvinists of her day upon all good works as "filthy rags." It was after her heart that her son John said to Whitefield, "Why try to prove that God is worse than the Devil? Satan tempts only; he compels no one to sin." Even Toplady attacked Wesley for his insistence upon outward righteousness, and the line

"Nothing in my hand I bring"

is but the softened echo of a very bitter controversy.

As a Biblical scholar Wesley was far behind his younger friend, Adam Clarke; yet he was surprisingly bold in many of his notes to the Old and New Testament, while he had no patience with the uncandid exegesis that, instead of explaining, explains away the text. The collateral parts of Scripture hardly interested him. He was absorbed by the central truths. These could be verified. Experience sustained, clarified, illuminated them. The scaffolding is not the temple. "The Lord God and the Lamb are the temple." The God that built the world and rules the nations, that rescues the oppressed and breaks in pieces the proud; the God that justifies by a faith that is fruitful and fills the heart with hope, who was in Christ reconciling the world to himself and who is now visible to the pure in heart, perfecting his children in love; the God that creates and controls and convicts and converts, that never forgets the lowly and works all things together for good to them that love him—Father, Son, and Spirit; this was to Wesley the temple of revelation, the sum and splendor of the Scriptures. To verify them one must find this only triune God to the joy and strength of one's soul; to prove them one must accomplish the Divine Will that they reveal, in regenerated homes, and transfigured workshops, and redeemed communities, and ennobled nations;

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get this will done on earth as in heaven. It would do Wesley's followers no harm to discover that they have narrowed his conception of God and sadly neglected his ethical ideals. Nay, it will do them great good to restore these in their grandeur and their purity and to recognize the unfaltering courage with which he applied them to the burning questions of his time; to the slave trade, to the treatment of prisoners and of paupers, to the care of orphans and the cure of the sick and the abolition of vice; to the help of the struggling, the defense of the weak and the education of the people. He would like, he said, "to join hands with God to help the poor man live." Yet he never condoned a cruelty or a cowardice or a crime, deeply as he pitied and loved the erring and the sinful.

Wesley's theology was by no means free from inconsistency, neither was his career. But like every great leader he suffers from the appellants who would shelter their absurdities under his authority. His career, however, when studied chronologically, is beautifully coherent; if he wavers, it is as a ship wavers when the billows are angry and the winds contrary; he yields as the skillful captain must to the compelling storm.

He started out early "to do a little good in the world." He was partly guided, partly driven, to do it in strange ways. The parochial system of England had no place for him, so he made "the world his parish." He loved the church of his country, but the bishops had no use for his societies and were blind to their opportunity. He loved the liturgy, but necessity drove him to pray extempore. He loved the indoor service, but necessity drove him to preach in the field and in the churchyard. The people were famished for the gospel; he organized lay preachers to give them bread, and societies to unite them in Christian fellowship. These societies and preachers in England and America, impatient of neglect and opposition, clamored for separate existence; he struggled hard to save them to the church, and then, real statesman as he was, furthered their separation to prevent their disruption. His attitude toward innovation was thoroughly English; he recoiled invariably. But his mind moved swiftly and his heart was pure. He had none of the fatal obstinacy that damaged Luther and ruined Napoleon. He was not a genius; not even an intellectual giant. But he was a man of rare gifts, touched by the hand of God; the noblest child of a remarkable family, trained to righteousness at home and educated in the best schools of his country. These gifts, this companionship, this training developed a character of uncertain promise until a sublime moment opened for him a unique career. For the splendor of God in John Wesley is the absolute fearlessness with which from that hour of "the warming of his heart" he followed his conscience. He was not strong; he had more than one hemorrhage; but he dreaded not pain, nor illness, nor death. He was not rich, but he gave away a fortune; he was reviled and slandered shamefully, but he committed his reputation to God as he had trusted his body to him when stones and curses filled the air. Robbed of domestic hap-



piness, partly by the action of others, partly by his own unwisdom, he was never sour, nor melancholy, nor envious, nor seclusive. His relations to brothers and sisters were frank and independent, and at times enchantingly gracious, as at the marriage of his brother Charles. His presence brightened every home that he entered, and children delighted in his talk. Crowds greeted him in his old age eager to see, though they could not hear him. His last spoken desire was that his friends should scatter broadcast a sermon that he had just written on the Love of God; the strange warming of the heart lasted to the end!

Shall one magnify or minimize his natural endowments? Neither, as the Lord liveth. Rejoice rather that his powers, great or small, were given unreservedly to "doing a little good in the world." Rejoice rather that the grace of God multiplied them into miracles of beneficent activity.

CHARLES J. LITTLE.

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W5 anity; an address before the Rock River Confer-
L5 ence at Aurora, Ill., Oct. 11, 1903. [n.p.,
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